

Sea Watching – An Introduction by Sharing an Experience

Praveen J, 14/779(2), AMBADI, Kunnathurmedu.P.O., Palakkad

As we approached the end of the stone wall, I could see several cars parked and an army of birders; wearing all kinds of protection gears for wind and rain, with spotting scopes pointing in one direction, braving the steady winds blowing from the rough sea, ignoring the cold drizzle that poured continuously; just to watch sea birds! The moment we parked our vehicle, I got out and saw a large brown bird flying close to the wall – my companion shouted “Great Skua!” I spend that whole day at Dunkerque, a village in French coast, watching many more Skuas and Petrels, with all the sea watchers who had come from various parts of France and Belgium to witness this spectacular migration on a cold and rainy French day. Thus I got inducted to sea watching!

Sea Watching is a specialized kind of bird watching that concentrates only on watching the true **oceanic birds** from the **sea coast**. Though pelagic birds can be observed by taking a special boat trip to deep sea or visiting islands with nesting sea birds, these methods are generally not classified under sea watching. However, the first sea watching experience can turn out to be daunting and probably depressing unless a seasoned sea-watcher helps you in pointing out the general silhouettes and flight patterns of various groups. Most sightings will be reasonably far to reach even with an excellent pair of binoculars and these specks on the sky can only be made out well by a good telescope of 20x magnification or above. Some days can be disheartening with long hours facing the gale and just a handful of speck sightings far off the coast. However, there are always a few days of the year when sea watching can be extremely exciting, with all kinds of birds blown to the coast offering reasonably good views – it is perhaps this knack of choosing the right days and right spots coupled with the challenge of spotting and identifying confusing plumages of sea birds that bring so much excitement into this activity.

On an official visit, I got to spend a full autumn at a small Belgian city called Brugge (Bruges to local people) where I made a lot of birder friends. Fredrik Williamyns, one of my birding pals (www.birdingpal.com), was extremely knowledgeable in local avifauna and he took me out a few times around Brugge. On a weekend in early September, he informed that the next Sunday is likely to be a good sea watching day as the spring migration in the English Channel is on, the coast of Belgium and Northern France sits right across the Channel. As he would not be able to make it, he advised me to look out for the wind speed and direction in the teletext¹ weather pages and if found favourable (NW winds with speed > 4.5 knots) visit the nearest peer at Oostende beach at sunrise. So I was at Oostende beach at the first light on a very windy morning but was surprised to find a handful of sea watchers already busy with their spotting scopes. I went around the group, tried to see what they were looking through my binoculars but hardly saw anything! Birdwatchers are always nice people, I picked up conversation with one of them by name Johan, and soon he was showing me a couple of birds through his scope. I

¹ A popular feature in European televisions where information like flash news, advertisements and weather can be obtained anytime by pressing a special button on the TV remote

was “shown” a Pomarine Skua and some Sooty Shearwaters but believe me except for the excitement of seeing my first sea birds, those birds were miles away and there was hardly any detail visible which could have helped me in identifying it myself.

However, some birdwatchers are really nice. Johan must be one of them. He got a phone call from a fellow friend sea-watcher at Dunkerque, a village 50km south across the French border, informing it to be more exciting down there. He checked with me if I had the full day for bird watching with me and offered me a ride to Dunkerque and back in the evening. Even though I had not planned for a full rigorous day, I could not resist a once-in-a-lifetime offer like this. When we reached Dunkerque, sea watching was at its frenzy. The sea wall was quite long and hence numerous birds hit the wall during migration and flew along the wall. I quickly learnt to identify the larger birds; the adult Skuas were easy if seen at a moderate distance. We had Great, Artic and Pomarine Skuas flying along the wall frequently but in singles. We also had a couple of sightings of juvenile Long-tailed Skuas, but according to Johan adults are very rare. A very common sea bird in these coasts is the Gannet, a large Tern like bird with dark upper wings, easy to separate and they don’t seem to be migrating with the rest of the birds. Leech Storm Petrel, called *Vulchan* in Dutch, was considered special by most of the sea watchers. These swallow-like birds flew just above the waves and looked as if getting wind blown every now and then. On this particular day, we must have seen close to 100-120 individuals, considered to be a high figure by most sea watchers here. When someone call out a *Pael*, one has to look out for a Manx Shearwater, a bird which flies over water with a Common Sandpiper like flight pattern. Its congener, Sooty Shearwater always flies further down the sea and flight pattern is different – strong wing beats with constant ascents and descents. Some of the Gulls and Terns which were new to me were hardly cared for by the locals – Little and Kittiwake Gulls, Artic and Sandwich Terns to name them. Sometimes a flock of Black Scooter (recently split into four species) or Brent Geese can be seen flying across and on one occasion we saw a Red-throated Loon in breeding plumage and on another a Common Guillemot. Perhaps the bird which evoked maximum reaction from everyone was the Sabine’s Gull – we must have got at least four birds that day with one of them offering everyone a more than a mouthful view. Birders were running helter-skelter to see the bird properly and to take a picture with their 600mm lens. The final tally for the day was quite impressive, a list of 18 ‘lifers’ for me and I don’t remember when I have seen so many new birds on a single day. Johan opinioned I was extremely lucky to choose a good day and that this would go down as one of the top ten sea watching days they ever had in this coast.

Principles of Sea Watching

Choose your Spot: The first fundamental principle of sea watching is choosing your vantage spot. Though sea birds might be moving in plenty in deep sea during migration, they hardly come near the coast. Hence there is little scope in watching sea birds near beaches. The ideal post is a projection into the sea, be it artificial or natural. Sea birds that fly slightly near the coast shall hit the projection, fly parallel to it and disappear into the deep sea. All good sea watching observations are made during this short flight time. Peers are generally preferred as they offer some kind of protection from the rough winds. Needless to say, the longer the peer, the better the chances of seeing more birds closer. If

you have multiple peers in a short distance, make sure you choose the one which the bird hits first during its flight.

Choose your Day & Time: The choice of the day greatly determines your luck with sea birds. It also means you need local knowledge on the migration of sea birds in deep sea. Once the general season, a span of two-three weeks, of migration time is chalked out then sea watchers need to keep a close watch on the wind forecast in the coast. Stronger the wind blowing towards the coast, better the chances of seeing wind-blown birds. However, make sure you don't put yourself at risk by being on the peer during very rough weather. Migration is intense during early mornings and late evenings with lull period during mid-day hours. This means one has to be at the spot by sunrise and stay backs till the sunset.

Sea Watching in Shores of Kerala

This is something which I have never done personally but is more of a speculation based on my earlier experience. Applying the above two principles, we have to look out for long peers in our coast. I know of two good peers, one is at Aalapuzha and the other one is at Bepore. There might perhaps be many more – readers can find out for themselves. However, the more difficult task is to find out when to watch birds. There is hardly any knowledge of regular migration in Arabian Sea or Indian Ocean – much has to be deduced from the pelagic bird records from the Kerala coast. Most of the records from the Kerala coast are made during the monsoons. Strong south-west winds blow these birds to the coast and sometimes inland and they are recovered by local people in a condition far from fit to fly. Such birds usually do not recover and end up getting stuffed in some museum. However, these recoveries, known as gale birds, do not necessarily indicate a migratory movement in the sea as they may just be a few that were wandering in the sea and got wind blown.

The only report that I know, of a strong movement of pelagic birds in the Kerala coast was made by a visiting Spanish birder, Juan José Ramos Encalado. In a personal e-mail elaborating on a posting he made in Oriental-Birding e-groups, he sent me the details of the movement of terns and gulls that was observed in the Kerala coast during his brief trip in January, 2005. I reproduce the data here with his permission to give an indication of the number of birds reported.

Location & Date	Common Name	Scientific Name	Frequency
Aalapuzha Beach 21-01-2005	Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensi</i>	21 birds/hour
	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlydonias hybridus</i>	66 birds/hour
	Brown-headed Gull	<i>Larus brunnicephalus</i>	5 birds/hour
	Pomarine Skua	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>	1 bird
Kochi 26-01-2005	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlydonias hybridus</i>	1533 birds/hour
	White-winged Tern	<i>Chlydonias leucopterus</i>	55 birds/hour
	Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>	173 birds/hour
	Brown-headed Gull	<i>Larus brunnicephalus</i>	30 birds/hour
	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	6 birds/hour
	Caspian Tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>	1 bird

	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Larus genei</i>	1 bird
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To me, this looks like a definite migration! Perhaps our birdwatchers should be watching the sea during the second fortnight of January to confirm these movements. Meanwhile, I do invite readers to share your observations where you have noticed a definite movement

Here I reproduce the list of true pelagic birds that have been confirmatorily reported till now from the Kerala coast.

1.	Persian Shearwater	<i>Puffinus persicus</i>
2.	Flesh-footed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus carneipes</i>
3.	Wilson's Storm-Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>
4.	Grey-backed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon ethereal</i>
5.	Masked Booby	<i>Sula dactylatra</i>
6.	Brown Booby	<i>Sula leucogaster</i>
7.	Great Frigate-bird	<i>Fregata minor</i>
8.	Lesser Frigate-bird	<i>Fregata ariel</i>
9.	Antarctic Skua	<i>Catharacta skua</i>
10.	Pomarine Skua	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>
11.	Lesser Crested Tern	<i>Sterna bengalensis</i>
12.	Large Crested Tern	<i>Sterna bergii</i>
13.	Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>
14.	Black-naped Tern	<i>Sterna sumatrana</i>
15.	White-cheeked Tern	<i>Sterna repressa</i>
16.	Bridled Tern	<i>Sterna anaethetus</i>
17.	Sooty Tern	<i>Sterna fuscata</i>
18.	Caspian Tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>
19.	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Larus genei</i>

So, off we go mates – let's try sea-watching on our coasts. There is a lot of excitement in store!